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THE HOUSE OF DREAMS-COME-TRUE

— BY —
MARGARET FIEDLER
Author of
"The Splendid Folly," "The Horn of the Wind,"
Hodder & Stoughton, Ltd., London.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

The Test

New Year's Eve found Jean sitting alone in Claire's special sanctum—the room which had witnessed that frightful scene when Sir Adrian had suddenly gone mad.

It was a cosy enough little room in winter-time. A cheery fire crackled in the open grate, while a heavy velvet curtain was drawn across the door that gave egress to the terrace, effectually screening out the ubiquitous draught which invariably seeks entry through crack and hinge-space.

Claire was at the Dower House this evening, where a New Year's dinner-party was in progress, but Jean had no heart for festivities of any kind even had she not been precluded from taking part in them by reason of her father's death.

With a quickly repressed sigh, she turned again to her book. Its pages fluttered faintly, as though stirred by some passing current of air, and Jean, coming suddenly out of her reverie, was conscious of a cool draught waiting towards her from the direction of the terrace door.

Vaguely surprised, she glanced up, and a startled cry broke from her lips. The door was open, the folds of the curtain had been drawn aside, and in the aperture stood Blaise Tormarin.

Jean sprang up from her chair and stood staring at him with dilated eyes, one hand gripping the edge of the chimney-piece.

"Blaise! . . . You!" The words issued stammeringly from her lips.

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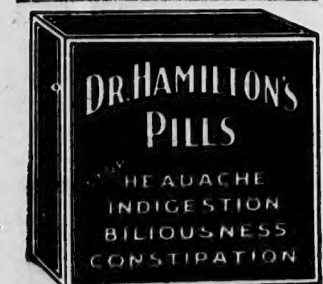
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"Yes," he returned shortly. "May I come in?"

Without waiting for an answer he closed the door behind him, letting the curtain fall back into its place, and crossed the room to her side.

Jean felt her heart contract as her eyes marked the changes wrought in him by the few weeks which had elapsed since she had seen him. His face was haggard as though from lack of sleep, and the lines on either side of the mouth were scored deep into the flesh. The mouth itself closed in a tense line of savage misery and the stark bitterness of his eyes filled her with grief and pity, knowing how utterly powerless she was to help or comfort him.

Distrusting her self-control, she snatched at the first conventional remark that suggested itself.

"I thought—I thought you and Nesta were both dining at the Dower House," she said confusedly.

"Nesta is there. I made an excuse. I came here instead."

Something in the curt, clipped sentences sounded a note of warning in her ears.

"But you ought not to have come here," she replied quickly—defensively almost. "Why have you come, Blaise?"

"I came," he said slowly, "because I can't bear my life without you a day longer. Because—Oh, Jean! Jean! . . . Beloved! Do you need to ask me why I came?"

With a swift, irresistible movement he swept her up into his arms, holding her crushed against his breast, his mouth on hers, kissing her as a man kisses when love that has been long thwarted and denied at last bursts asunder the shackles which constrained it.

And Jean, starved for four months of the touch of the beloved arms, the pressure of the beloved lips upon her own, had yielded to him almost before she was aware of her surrender.

Then the remembrance of the woman who stood between them rushed across her and she tore herself free from his embrace, white and trembling in every limb.

"Blaise! . . . Blaise! . . . What are you thinking of? Oh! We're mad—mad!"

She covered her face with her shaking hands but he drew them away, gazing down at her with eyes that worshipped.

"No, beloved, we're not mad," he cried triumphantly. "We're sane—sane at last. We were mad to think we could live apart, mad to dream we could starve love like ours. That was when we were mad! But we'll never be parted again; sweet—"

"Blaise," she whispered, staring at him with horrified dilated eyes. "You don't know what you are saying! You're forgetting Nesta—your wife. Oh, go—go quickly! You must not stay here and talk like this to me!"

"No," he returned. "I won't go, Jean. I've come to take you away with me." Once more his arms went round her. "Belovedest, I can't live without you any longer. I've tried—and I can't do it. Jean, you'll come? You love me enough—enough to come away with me to the ends of the earth where we'll find happiness at last?"

She sought to free herself from his clasp, pressing with straining hands against his chest.

"No! No!" she cried breathlessly. "I can't go with you . . . you know I can't! Ah! Don't ask me, Blaise! There was an agony of supplication in her voice.

"But I do ask you. And if you love

me—his eyes holding hers—"you'll come, Jean."

"I do love you," she answered earnestly. "But it isn't the you I love asking me this, Blaise. It's some other man—a stranger—"

"If you love me, you'll come," he reiterated doggedly. "I can't live without you, Jean. I want you—oh, heart's beloved, if you knew—!" And the burning, passionate words, the pent-up love and longings of months of separation and despair, came pouring from his lips—beseeching and demanding, wringing her heart, pulling at the love within her that ached to give him the answer which he craved.

"Oh, Blaise, dearest of all—hush! Hush!" She checked him brokenly, with quivering lips. "I can't go with you. It wouldn't bring us happiness. Ah, listen to me, dear!" She came close to him and laid her hands imploringly on his arm, lifting her white, stricken face to his. "It would only spoil our love—to take it like that when we have no right to it. It would smother and soil it, make it something different. I think—I think, in the end, Blaise, it would kill it."

"Nothing would ever kill my love for you," he exclaimed passionately. "Jean, little Jean, think of what our life together might be—the glory and beauty of it—just you and I in our House of Dreams!"

She caught her breath. Oh! Why did he make it so hard for her? With every fibre of her being yearning towards him she must refuse, deny him, drive him away from her.

"No, No!" she cried tremulously. "We could never reach our House of Dreams that way—Oh, I know it! At least, not the sort of House of Dreams that would be worth anything to you or me, Blaise. It would only be a sham, a make-believe. You can't build true on a rotten foundation. . . . Don't ask me any more, dear. It's so hard—so hard to keep on saying no when everything in me wants to say yes. But I must say it. And you . . . you must go back to Nesta."

Her voice almost failed her. She could feel her strength ebbing with every moment that she stayed beside her. She knew that she would not be able to resist his pleading much longer. Her own heart was fighting against her—fighting on his side!

He saw her weakness and caught at it eagerly. "Do you know what you're asking?" he demanded hoarsely. "Do you know what you are sending me back to? Our life together—Nesta's and mine—has been simple hell upon earth. I obeyed you—and I took her back. But I have done no good by it. She is as weak and worthless as she ever was. Our days are one continual round of bickering and quarrels." His face darkened. "And she is not satisfied! Her nominal position as my wife does not content her. Do you understand what that must mean—if I go back?" He paused, his eyes bent steadily upon her. "Jean—very low—now that you know—will you still send me back to Nesta? Or will you come with me and let us find our happiness together?"

He watched the scarlet flood surge into her face and then retreat, leaving it a pallid white.

"Answer me!" he persisted, as she remained silent.

"Wait . . . wait a little . . ."

She turned away from him and, leaning her elbows on the chimney-piece, buried her face in her hands.

The supreme test had come at last. She realized, now, that her renunciation—that renunciation which had cost her so much pain and bitterness—had been, after all, only something superficial and incomplete. She had not made the full sacrifice that duty and honour demanded of her. Though she had outwardly renounced her lover—bade him return to Nesta—she still held him hers by the utter faithfulness of his love for her. Nesta had had the husk, the shell—a husband in name only, every hour of their life together an insult to her pride and womanhood.

She saw it all now with a terrible clarity of vision, understood to the full the two alternatives which faced her—to go with Blaise, as he implored, or to send him—her man, the man she loved—back to Nesta. There was no longer any middle course.

A voice sounded in her ears. "No true happiness ever came of running away from duty. And if ever I'm up against such a thing—a choice like this—I hope to God I'd be able to hang on, to run straight, even if it half-killed me to do it!"

The words sounded so clear and distinct that Jean half raised her head to see who spoke them. And then, in an overwhelming rush of memory, she recognized that it was no actual voice she heard but the mental echo of her own words to Nick—at the time when he had been passing through a like fire of fierce temptation.

"Well?" he demanded, his voice roughened because he found himself unable to steady it with that strained and altered face upturned to his. "Well? Are you going to send me back to Nesta?"

She did not answer his question. Instead, she put another. "Do you think she—loves you?"

"Nesta? Yes. As far as her sort can love, I believe she does."

Jean nodded, as though it were the answer she had expected.

"Blaise . . . I'm going to send you back to her. I'm sure now. I know. It's the only thing we can do . . . We must say goodbye—altogether—never see each other again."

"Never?" The word came draggingly.

"Never. It—it would be too hard for us, Blaise, to see each other."

"Yes," he answered slowly. "It would be too hard."

They were both silent. The minutes ticked away unregarded. Time had ceased to count. This farewell was till the end of time.

"Blaise . . . All the resonance had gone out of her voice. It sounded flat and tired. "You—you will go back to her?"

"Yes, I will go back."

She stretched out her hands flutteringly.

"Then go . . . go soon, Blaise! I—I can't bear very much more."

He opened his arms, then, and she went to him, and for a space they clung together in silence. For the last time he set his lips to hers, held her once more against his heart. Then slowly they drew apart, stricken eyes gazing lingeringly into other eyes as stricken, and presently the closing of the terrace door told her that he had gone, and that she must turn her feet to the solitary path of those who have said farewell to love.

Henceforth, she would be alone—living or dying, quite alone.

It was long past midnight when Claire returned from the Dower House.

She found Jean sitting beside the grey embers of a burnt-out fire, her hands lying folded upon her knee, her eyes staring stonily in front of her in a fixed, unseeing gaze.

Claire called to her softly, as when one wakes a sleeper.

"Jean!"

Jean turned her head.

"So you have got back?" she said dully. She stood up stiffly, as though her limbs were cramped. "Claire, I am going away—right away from here—to Bernfels."

"Why?" asked Claire.

She waited tensely for the answer.

"Blaise has been here. He asked me to go away with him. I've sent him back to Nesta."

The short, stilted sentences fell mechanically from her lips. She spoke exactly like a child repeating a lesson learned by rote.

Claire's eyes grew very pitiful.

"And must you go to Bernfels alone?" she asked quietly. "Won't you take me with you?"

"Will you come?"—incredulously.

"Of course I'll come. I shouldn't dream of letting you go by yourself."

And then, all at once, Jean's tired body, exhausted by the soul's long conflict, gave way, and she slipped to the ground in a dead faint.

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CHAPTER XXXV.

The Eve Of Departure

A week later Jean sat at the foot of the stairs and surveyed with faint amusement the motley collection of trunks, and suit-cases which thronged the hall.

"What a lot of useless lumber we women carry about with us wherever we go!" she commented. "Five—six—seven packages to supply the needs of two solitary females—and Heaven only knows how many brown paper parcels will be required at the last moment for all the things we shall find we have forgotten when the time actually comes to start."

Claire, standing on the flight of stairs above and viewing the assemblage in the hall from over the top of the banister rail, giggled helplessly.

"Yes, they do look a lot," she admitted. "However"—hopefully—"there'll be plenty of room for them all when we actually get to Bernfels."

"Oh, plenty," agreed Jean. "But we've got to convey them half across Europe first—two lone women and one miserable maid who will probably combine train-sickness and homesickness to an extent that will totally incapacitate her for the performance of her duties."

At this moment the front-door bell clanged violently through the house, as though pulled by someone in a tremendous hurry. Claire hastily withdrew her head from over the banister rail and disappeared upstairs, while Jean relinquished the accommodation offered by the bottommost step and sought refuge in the nearest of the sitting-rooms, closing the door stealthily behind her.

A moment later Tucker, who had caught sight of her hurriedly retreating figure, reopened it and announced impudently:

"Mr. Burke."

"I'm in time, then?" he said, when he had shaken hands.

"In time? In time for what?"

"In time to see you before you go."

"Oh, yes," Jean spoke lightly. "You're in time for that. But who told you I was going away? I didn't know you were in England, even."

"I came back a fortnight ago—to London. Judith wired me from home that you were leaving Coombe Eavie."

"I don't see the necessity for her wiring you," remarked Jean a little coldly. "There was no need for you to see me."

"There was—every need."

She glanced at him keenly, a new note in his voice, an unexpected gravity and restraint.

"Every need," he repeated. He paused, then went on quickly, with a nervousness that was foreign to him. "Jean, I know everything that has happened—that your engagement to Tormarin is at an end—and I have come to ask you if you will be my wife. No—hear me out!"—as she would have interrupted him—"I'm not asking you now—as I did before. If you will marry me, I swear I will ask for nothing that you are not willing to give. I'm making no demands. I've learned now—with a faint, wry smile—"that you cannot force love. It can only be given. And I want nothing but just the right to take care of you, to shield you—to keep the sharp corners of life away from you." Then, as he read her incredulous face, he went on gravely: "If I had wanted more than that, Jean, if I had not learned something—just from loving you, I should not have waited until now. I should have come at once—as soon as I learned from Madame de Varigny that Tormarin's wife was still alive."

She looked at him curiously.

"Why didn't you come then, Geoffrey? I sometimes wondered—your being you!"—with a faint smile. "Because, of course, I knew why you had rushed off to France. Madame de Varigny explained that."

A dull flush mounted to his face.

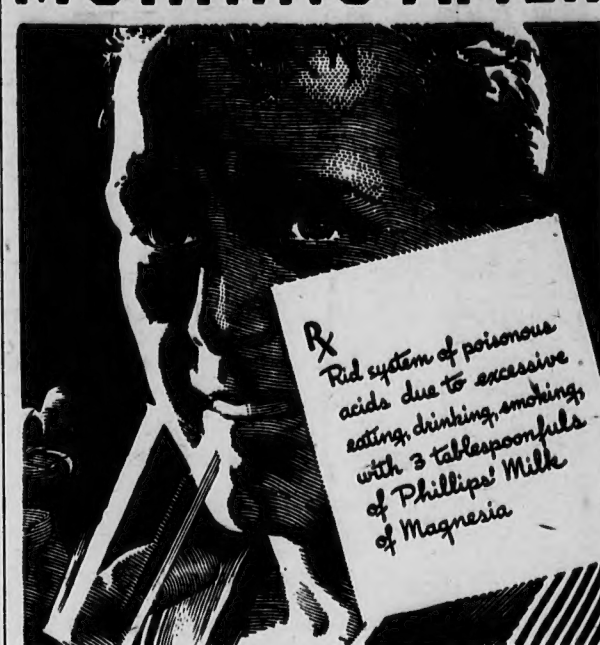
"Did she? I expect she told you merely what was the truth. I went to see her because she had assured me that she could stop your marriage with Tormarin—could interfere in some way to prevent it. That was why I went to France. . . . But when she told me her blackguardly scheme—how she had planned and plotted to conceal the fact that Tormarin's wife was alive—and why she had done it, I would have no hand in anything that followed. I'm no saint!"—a brief, ironical smile flitted across his face—"but there are some methods at which even I draw the line."

"So—that was why you stayed away?"

"That was why. I wanted you, Jean—God only knows how I wanted you!—but I couldn't try to force your hand at such a time. I couldn't profit by a damnable scheme like that."

Jean's eyes grew soft as she realized that beneath all the impetuous arrogance and dominant demands of

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the man's temperament there yet lay something fine and clean and straight—difficult to get at, perhaps, but which could yet rise, in answer to a sense of honor and fairness with which she had not credited him, and take command of his whole nature.

"I'm glad—glad you didn't come, Geoffrey," she said gently. "Glad you—couldn't."

"I don't know that I'm glad about it," he returned with a grim candour. "I simply couldn't do it, and that's all there is to it. But I've come now, Jean. I've come because I want you to give me just the right to look after you. I'm not asking for anything. I only want to serve you—if you'll let me—just to be near you. If Tormarin were free, I would not have come to you again. I know I should have no chance. But he's not free. Does that give me a chance, Jean? If it doesn't, I'll take myself off—I'll never bother you again. I'll try Africa—big game shooting"—with a short laugh. "But if it does—"

He paused and waited for her answer. The intensity of longing in his eyes was the sole indication of the emotion that stirred within him—an emotion held in check by a stern self-control that seemed to Jean to be part of this new, changed lover of hers. Surely, in the months which had elapsed since she had fled from him on Dartmoor, he had fought with his devils and cast them out!

She held out her hands to him.

"Geoffrey, I'm so sorry—but I'm afraid it doesn't. I wish—I wish I could give you any other answer. But, you see, it isn't marrying—it's love that matters. And all my love is given."

He took her hands in his and held them gently with that strange, new restraint he seemed to have learned.

"I see," he said slowly. Then for a moment his calm wavered. The underlying passion, so strongly held in leash, shook the even tones of his voice. "Tormarin is a lucky man—in spite of everything! I'd give my soul to have what he has—your love, Jean."

His big hands closed round her

slight ones and he lifted them to his lips. Then, without another word, he went away, and Jean was left wondering sorrowfully why the love that she did not want was offered her in such full measure, hers to take at will, while the love for which she craved, the love which would have meant the glory and fulfillment of life itself, was denied her—shut away by all the laws of God and Man.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Reunion

Jean leaned idly against the ancient wall which bounded the stone-paved court at Bernfels and looked down towards the valley below.

Spring was in the air—late come to this eastern corner of Europe—but, at last, even here the fragrance of fresh growing things was permeating the atmosphere, strips of vivid blue rent the grey skies, and splashes of golden sunshine lay dappled over the shining roofs of the village that nestled in the valley.

But no responsive light had lit itself in Jean's wistful eyes. She was out of tune with the season, Spring and hope go hand in hand, the one symbolical of the other, and the promise of spring-time, the blossom of hope, was dead within her heart—withered almost before it had had time to bud. (To Be Continued.)

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